



[2017 Commencement Address — Notre Dame de Namur University
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STORIES OF CHANGE: Creating a Culture of Connection in The Citizens' Century

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Gratitude

(Libby) I see your smiling faces, and I know why. Notre Dame de Namur University Class of 2017, you worked so hard to earn this day. Make some noise for yourselves!

(Len) What a morning to remember, together with the people who helped you get here — your visionary, strong administration and trustees; nurturing, accomplished faculty; can-do staff; believing family; priceless friends. These are your champions and cheerleaders who kept filling your tank when it seemed empty, who said you could when you thought you couldn't. These angels to your life, how awesome are they!

Let's remember always that not one of us grows up, excels, or even survives alone. In our homes, and across our campuses, communities, America, and Planet Earth — we need each other; we live this life together.

Unexpected Opportunities

Today, Len and I are thrilled to share with you memories of our 50-year adventure together.

Like our life, yours will also be full of surprises. As carefully as you plan, much will come to you as unexpected, un-solicited opportunities to fulfill yourselves and help others. We suggest jumping into adventures of service, even as unpaid volunteers. Parents, don't stress; we also recommend real jobs and financial responsibility.

As we share some of our stories of change — some adventures and surprises — be considering how you might harness your own time, imagination, and hearts time to help people and create our better world.

An Unlikely Pair

I was born in 1940 and grew up in a large, traditional Presbyterian family in Indianapolis, Indiana. My parents celebrated 67 years of marriage. Their commitment inspired me. Rachel, my straight-laced grandmother, forbade any of her five children from dating anyone Catholic or Jewish, or of color. Throughout childhood, I was often admonished: "Libby! What would people think?"

My immigrant great-grandparents were the first Jewish couple to settle in Duluth, Minnesota, where I was born before World War II, before the Holocaust. I was an only child but surrounded by a large Jewish family. As a preschooler, I asked many questions, like: "Grandma, is everyone in Duluth Jewish?" It was the limited world I knew. That Orthodox Jewish grandmother, not unlike Libby's, had forbade any of her seven children from marrying outside of Judaism. I inherited much of that clanishness.

In 1966, I met Len. It was a hot August. Our families met and got to know each. Old stereotypes disappeared. Love triumphed. A year later we married, appreciating but not limited by our individual clans. Our new life together in San Francisco opened my eyes to a whole, new world of diversity.

I continued my career practicing and teaching pediatric dentistry, while Libby was a clinical social worker at Mt. Zion Hospital.

In 1969, two events changed us forever — the birth of our daughter, Eleanor, and seeing for the first time the photograph of Planet Earth taken from space. Right away we started "thinking globally, acting locally." We wasted less resources and planted our first vegetable garden.

The 1970s of Family, Deepening, and Volunteerism

In 1971 our son, Adam, was born. Throughout the '70s we explored our faith traditions and matters of the spirit to discover "what works" in real life and guides us to this day. We addressed social issues and marched for Middle East peace. Our kids called us "hippies." Normal family stuff always continued — surfing, quilting, camping, coaching sports. Eating lots of dark chocolate. It was all one life.

The 1980s and the Soviets

In the early 1980s our life took another big turn. We realized that, on purpose or by accident, nuclear war with the Soviet Union could end life on Earth. We said "yes" to help found the successful Beyond War Movement, insisting that all conflict be resolved without violence — no bombing, and for us no spanking.

We weren't so much "anti" or "against," but listened more to economist E.F. Schumacher, author of *Small is Beautiful*, who prescribed how to budget our time and energy while working for change, not by slaying the dinosaur but inventing the gazelle — modeling the new, better way of leaping forward into our shared future together.

Other mentors reminded us to be practical and conservative, and that "faith is not sitting down on a chair that isn't there." So our test for truth became personal experience — initiating, saying "yes" to opportunities. And some were risky, and a bit scary.

For example, in the midst of the Cold War we said "yes" to flying with American Physicians for Social Responsibility into enemy territory, the Soviet Union. For three weeks in 1984 we listened carefully as the Russians shared their life stories. We experienced their equal humanity, and realized forever that "an enemy is one whose story we have not heard." We returned home inspired and alive — not kidnapped, poisoned, or imprisoned as our parents feared.

We learned that conflict resolution begins with first knowing the other human being. "Who are you? Tell me your story." This kept working when we brought together Armenians and Azerbaijanis, Blacks and Whites here in San Mateo, and in 1991, Israelis and Palestinians.

The 1990s and the Middle East

Following our Soviet-American successes, Israeli and Palestinian citizen-leaders asked us to host and facilitate them in California. Holy Land meetings were illegal, forbidden.

So in July '91, Beyond War and Stanford hosted the conference, "Building a Common Future," in the redwoods above Santa Cruz. The brave Palestinians and Israelis forged a first-ever signed agreement, Framework for a Public Peace Process. Their historic document clarified that "there are some things only governments can do, such as negotiating binding agreements. But there are some things that only citizens outside government can do, such as changing human relationships." Inspired, with increased purpose, Libby and I returned with them to the Middle East to help announce their groundbreaking declaration to Jerusalem.

Bringing Peacebuilding Home

Again "acting locally," 25 years ago we convened in our home the first Jewish Palestinian Living Room Dialogue of San Mateo County. This Monday will be our 293rd meeting — still learning together.

Our courage grew, and our San Mateo handful of Muslims, Jews, and Christians hosted a historic Bay Area Dinner-Dialogue for 420 Palestinians and Jews. Imagine 42 tables of anxious adversaries meeting — most for the first time. It was electric, made headlines, and inspired new encounters everywhere.

In the mid-'90s, Elie Wiesel gave us this insight that "people become the stories they hear and the stories they tell." So we created a simple family Website to make visible all the human success stories in relationship building to balance the flood of human failures reported by traditional news media — "if it bleeds it leads." Future journalists and filmmakers, we urge you to consider your choice of story. For you, how about: "If it succeeds it leads?"

The 2000s and Becoming Hard News

Entering this 21st century, after the shock of 9/11 we were overwhelmed with requests to help begin and mentor dozens of Dialogue groups across North America. News networks and journalists seeking signs of hope discovered our simple Website, and Dialogue became headlines. We never pursued them, but they came into the living room -- CNN, MSNBC, NPR, Voice of America, and many more. This citizen-driven, face-to-face public peace process was now hard news. We had entered "The Citizens' Century."

Breakthroughs at Notre Dame de Namur University

Your Notre Dame campus was part of this unexpected history. We can't forget this exact, first week in May 2003, in classroom Cuvilly 6. Professor Miriam Zimmerman's Senior Communication Seminar of a dozen willing students modeled a new way of personal story-sharing with a quality of listening that heals people and relationships. That very breakthrough in experiential learning is increasingly used worldwide from American neighborhoods to African tribal reconciliations.

The next year in your Ralston Hall, a professor from the U.S. Naval Postgraduate School was brought to tears by our panel of Jewish and Palestinian Dialogue exemplars. We would not have dreamed that within a month communication practices first modeled by your Notre Dame students would be facilitated for U.S. and allied military officers studying Post-Conflict Security Building.

These combat commanders were passionate that such human engagement be applied to prevent wars in the first place. Their embrace of civil discourse that day deepened our own faith that the soul's oldest memory is of union, and the soul's deepest longing is for reunion.

Enemies Go to Camp

Trusting this experience, our small San Mateo Living Room Dialogue again went global, partnering with traditionally-Jewish Camp Tawonga near Yosemite to create the first Palestinian-Jewish Family Peacemakers Camp. For five years we brought together hundreds of youth and adults from 50 different towns in Israel and Palestine.

Seeing those Arabs and Jews from war release so much emotion and unhealed wounding, we realized what Maya Angelou meant: "There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you." We were so impressed how story sharing healed and dignified both speakers and listeners. Surprisingly and paradoxically, we became convinced that the first step to life beyond war is not to harm or humiliate, but to dignify your enemy.

Documentary Films Go to the World, Taking Dialogue to Africa

As international citizens, universities, and even military libraries began requesting communication tools, we produced documentary films to spread worldwide. Today, they all stream online, and 17,000 DVDs have gone to every state, and 1,300 cities in 98 countries on every continent. Through the magic of the Internet, we continue to mentor Dialogue partners around the world.

In 2010 we got a life-changing phone call! "Hello. This is Emmanuel Ivorgba calling from West Africa. We've seen your films. We need this here in Nigeria. Will you fly here to help us?"

"Africa? Malaria? Kidnappings? In the midst of war?" Len and I look at each other and thought: "Why go?" And then, "Why not?" The next day we phoned back: "Yes, of course!" Soon we flew to facilitate 200 brave Muslims and Christians in youth interfaith dialogue on the high plateau of central Nigeria. We learned from them that the biggest killer in West Africa was not HIV/AIDS. It was HRV, Human Relationship-deficiency Virus!

Our resulting documentary film, *Dialogue in Nigeria*, was requested worldwide and distributed throughout Nigeria by the U.S. Department of State. Today African facilitators use the film's practices to resolve tribal wars and — importantly — to know and de-stigmatize persons with disabilities, and include them in community life.

Bringing the Boon Home to San Mateo

Fast forward to 2017 post-election San Mateo County — right now — when citizens are increasingly feeling like strangers in our own land. This January we reserved Martin Luther King, Jr. Community Center, and 115 very diverse women and men filled the room for *CROSSING LINES IN SAN MATEO: Sharing Stories, Creating Community*. Ages 18 to 85, from many faiths, traditions, and neighborhoods, they packed the hall and experienced what many never do in a whole lifetime — being given voices and ears, being heard and hearing, with a new quality of listening-to-learn, listening to everyone.

Now About Your Life

Now let's conclude.

2017 graduates, this next epoch of your adult life means less dependency and more initiating; taking less and more giving. But giving what? We've illustrated what you already know — what strengthens families and ends war: Everyone has a story that needs, even cries, to be listened to. Unheard and disregarded, very good, loving women, men, and youth can become hopeless, desperate, even violent, even terrorists. This is preventable and curable — by you — if today you can choose to become a great listener. As the first one in the room to listen, you have the power to change the relationship.

The Wisdom Keepers Have Had It Right

Days ago Pope Francis said in his surprise TED Talk that the only future worth building includes everyone.

Fifty years of marriage and meeting people have shown us that the indigenous traditions and most religions at their roots have had it right: we are one — totally interconnected and interdependent with all people and with Earth herself. There is no individual survival.

Abraham, Sarah, and the Hebrews had it right. The creator is one and we the created are one — family forever.

The Prophets of Judaism had it right that we are meant to go up the mountain to become our best selves — together.

Jesus of Nazareth had it right, to love in every situation and to include everyone, excluding no one.

And Islam has it right. The Persian poet, Hafiz-e Shirazi, reminds us that “fear is the cheapest room in the house.” Do not be manipulated by fear or swayed from helping to create global community.

The Muslim Sufi Jalal ad-Din Rumi says: “Out beyond right-doing and wrong-doing there is a field. I'll meet you there.” He was inviting everyone.

The Invitation

So now Len and I invite you to say “yes” to inevitable opportunities that will come to you.

Yes, to dedicate yourselves to bringing people together.

Yes, to moving into experience — creating safe places of listening that dignify everyone.

Yes, to create your great, new Culture of Connection — no less than a Renaissance of Communication across America and around Earth.

Class of 2017, I have this final question for you — your final pop-quiz.

Can you do this? Can you become the artisans of communication, the great listeners humankind is waiting for? Can you?

Thank you.

Thank you for listening!

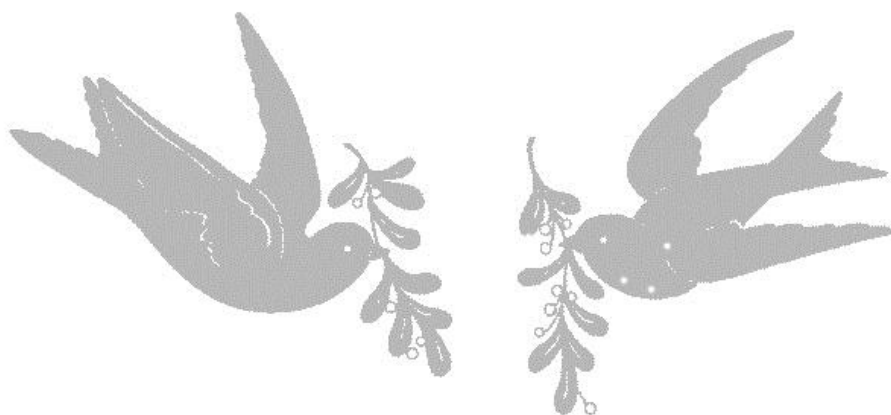


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